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ABSTRACT

The California Statewide Longitudinal Study provided information on community college students' experiences and needs which is of value for colleges in determining strategies and priorities. While, however, this and similar studies address the needs of the learners and the colleges, the impressions and concerns of one key client, the prospective employer, are not adequately considered. Extensive efforts to sample employer needs are necessary if the colleges are to be responsive to changing conditions in the community and society. In addition to gathering information on their clients, colleges need to examine priorities and missions in light of serious pressures on resources Rather than choosing areas to cut back (e.g., transfer or vocational education), the colleges should seek to identify alternative funding sources and collaborate to develop programs that will meet the needs of the institution and its students, employers, resource providers, and the community. Just as colleges impress upon students the need for flexibility in career and life goals, so the colleges themselves should be sufficiently flexible and adaptive in terms of goals, programs, structures, and funding to reflect the changing focus of and shifts in society. Collaboration among all parties interested in and involved with community college education can ensure development of college programs and goals in a period of fiscal stringency. (HB)

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INFORMAL OBSERVATIONS on the Longitudinal Study, Basic Support Concerns Affecting the Colleges and the Nature of Programs Offered; The Potential for Problem Resolution Through Collaborative Participation and Alternative Resources.

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California Community Colleges provide a highly diversified education system. The colleges have become a kaleidoscope in response to economic growth, population growth, a changing citizenry, and shifting employment interests.

This is as it should be. The function of education is to reflect the needs of the community. The present diversity of community college education mirrors the success of the system in meeting community needs.

The task of the colleges is to facilitate the development of learners so that they can successfully participate in the community (and its economy). The colleges serve three key clients -- learners, the community, and prospective employers.

Learners may be transfer, vocational, or casual students with limited study goals. Whether they are any of these, they are all on different but similar paths affecting their personal growth, and participation in the community.

While longitudinal studies do a fairly thorough job reviewing the experiences of the colleges and the learner, the experiences of one of the primary clients -- the employer -- may be left too much to reflections provided from evidence affecting only the college or the learner.

A longitudinal study that does not systematically include the perspective of employers may be something less than it ought to be.

Recent longitudinal study reports indicate that vocational students are more or less getting what they want. The 1979 longitudinal study report shows that of those attending vocational classes, 80% were enrolled to gain skills for jobs or careers, or to be upgraded in their employment. Some 12.3% of these were attending for a job or career change. Of those enrolled in vocational pursuits, 45% received more pay after attending college, 48% received the same pay after attending. Of the sample studied, 31.2% indicated they thought they were transfer students.

The volume of previous longitudinal study evidence related to courses and learners is impressive. The volume of evidence related to employer impressions and concerns is limited.

Extended efforts to sample employers would seem appropriate. Advisory committees do provide assistance in this regard, but actual systematic samples of employers not directly associated with the college structure, through advisory committees, should be expanded. Employer needs, just as the needs of the learners, are diversified, too, and require more feedback than advisory committees alone.

There are problems confronting community colleges, however, that reach beyond the pale of data gathering and internal information sharing. These problems relate closely to the survival of the community colleges and their function in the future.

Current tight resources are generating reconsideration of the primary purposes for having community colleges. Are the colleges there to primarily serve transfer students, or vocational students, or students with individual learning needs not related to certification. Are the colleges there to serve the broader needs of the community, its economy and employment capacity, or are the colleges

there as a less costly approach for four-year post-secondary matriculation?

While tight budgets and resources are a part of the dilemma, new pressures from four-year post-secondary levels, which often see the community colleges' primary function as a transfer institution, reflect skewed interests.

The argument stressing transfer students may enjoy additional internal college support from faculty groups which affect governance and historically tend to represent academic transfer interest.

As these budget and transfer student concerns wallow on to resolution, or futher confusion, a changing employment climate, emerging high technology, a service oriented economy -- is exercising new demands on the colleges, too.

In the meantime, if something is to continue, or something is to be cut, the emphasis for surviving programs may stress support for transfer student programs, with cuts allocated to vocational, or independent learner pursuits.

Some argue that the colleges try to teach an impossible spectrum of students with highly motivated people sitting beside high school dropouts, or part-time casual students.

A study from the Chancellor's Office (recently reported in the Sacramento Bee) suggests a three-phase admission screening process:

1) A certified level of competence for admission to a transfer program;

2) The use of a passing score on high school proficiency tests (as a pre-requisite for enrollment in credit courses and associate degree programs, or transfer programs);

3) Demonstrated proficiency in basic skills as a requirement for the associate degree.

Would a more restrictive approach meet the needs of all or most students, or the community and employers.

Underlying this question is the problem of whether or not the functions of the colleges should be altered or limited by periodic fluctuating financial aberrations.

If the colleges are to continue to reflect the interest and needs of clients, the problem is really not one of restricting the colleges' focus, but working together (public, private sectors) to improve existing resources and identify alternative resources, so that clients are served.

More definitive data may be needed to pursue, attract and expand existing resources and alternative ones, particularily in the face of a depressed economic or tax environment. The longitudinal study already has a hand on some of that data and presumably the ability to collate additional information.

If resources, not function, is the real problem and existing resources have truly been exhausted, then those who are served may have to help support the services they get.

Student fees, contracts with employers, private sector scholarships, grants and extended support relations with other agencies are parts of an alternative resource pool.

Along with future longitudinal studies, studies related to alternative resources also need to be generated carefully, in a reasonable time-frame, with the participation of all clients and potential support elements.

As alternative support modes are studied and pursued, it should be remembered that students, the community and employers will continue to expect quality learning experiences congruent with the interests of the community and those of the resource providers.

Future longitudinal studies may need to cover not only the nature of the student, or the program, and the interests of the colleges, but also the interests of the alternative resource providers. These resource provider interests may or may not always include transfers, or associate degrees or certification. These interests may prefer short-term or upgrading courses and open entry/exit learning options for job functional purposes.

There is a growing national concept that taxpayers generally applaud collaboratives that collate existing resources for the best service performance.

Community college futures may require systematic collaborative ventures which encompass all resource potentials, with implementation strategies for using these resources for their best cost-effective, product-result, client-centered options.

After each of these resources are collated, and articulated in terms of program and service needs, and implemented through a program, any gaps that exist in service might then be provided by learners through fee/equity arrangements.

Survival of the broad focus of community colleges is not a problem just for the colleges, it is a problem for the community and those elements which comprise the community and use the college.

Community college survival or focus is not an issue to be resolved internally by special segments of the education system independently working on solutions.

College survival and focus problems require the involvement of a consortium representing the four-year and graduate institutions, employers, resource providers (existing and potentials), and the community. Other arms of governance affecting the colleges have a role, too, i.e., Legislators, the Executive, related agencies -- EDD, Rehab., etc.

Some additional observations:

Community colleges and college instructors invariably impress students with the need for flexibility related to life goals, avocational and vocational interests, the changing nature of the economy, the impact of technology, and other variables which require personal adjustment.

If the student needs to be flexible, so do the colleges and their staffs. The community college's role should probably never be set in concrete. It should reflect the changing focus and shifts of society.

The colleges -- just as the students -- must be adaptive in goals, program, structure, and funding if the system is to survive. A collaborative baseline to stimulate and assist colleges as they anticipate their future may be needed. The California Community College Chancellor's Office could generate that collaboration and pull interested "players" and recommendations together in some form of "Blue Ribbon" study.

The longitudinal study process obviously could have a key role. Future longitudinal study, isolated and on its own, will mean less than it otherwise might if it were an instrument in a larger scope of action.

A word about employers. Employers, as clients of the system, have a paramount role in any study of the college's future or any collaborative resolution process.

Advisory committees for vocational concerns (isolated from the rest of the college's performance) are not of themselves sufficient business participation.

Many employers are already pulled into the system through a variety of interests (EDD, PICS, CWETA, CETA), but those roles are generally limited to occupational concerns.

Employers are already a good portion of the tax base which supports the community college system. They also have a stake in the viability of the overall community (they do not survive well themselves in a less-viable community). For that reason, they have a stake in the product of the college -- competent citizens, consumers, and employables.

In addition, employers can serve as an alternative support mechanism through direct contracts for specific education/training,

through broader foundation/corporate support, through scholarships, and through their existing acceptance and leadership role in the general community.

Employer involvement in the formation of community college futures is a value to all parties -- the community, the employer, colleges, and the student.

Some first steps are needed. A collaborative structure and process for addressing the generic and specific service futures of the colleges and adequate support mechanisms is necessary.

Time is running out. While attention is being diverted to concerns about how we should be divesting the college's programs (in a period of financial distress) the critical concern about what we should be investing in is eroding.

If we can all invest together, we will generate something more from the new "whole" then we ever did from any of its "parts."

If society cannot function cooperatively, and collaboratively, it may not function at all. The California community college system is no exception.

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